

FRENCH CULTURE COURSE

The Tour de France

From a newspaper stunt in 1903 to a global event: the story, the champions and the myths of the Tour de France.

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

Generated with Claude

THE TOUR DE FRANCE

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The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · What Is the Tour de France? Scope & Sources

Every July, for about three weeks, a bicycle race crosses France, and a large part of the country stops to watch. The Tour de France is a sporting event, a television programme, an advertising campaign, a tourist board's best friend and, for many French people, a national ritual. This first chapter explains what the race is, the jerseys and vocabulary needed to follow it, why the course treats it as culture and not only sport, and where to find reliable sources. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Race in Outline

The format

The Tour is a "stage race": a series of daily races (*étapes*) whose times are added together. Today there are normally 21 stages over 23 days, with two rest days, and a total distance of around 3,300 km (check). The route changes every year, though it always ends in Paris.

Who rides

About 22 professional teams of 8 riders start (check), around 176 riders in all. Most riders work for a team leader, and the winner is the rider with the lowest total time at the end, called the general classification (*classement général*, GC).

Who runs it

The race is organised by a private company, Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO), which also runs other major races and belongs to the Amaury group, publisher of the sports daily *L'Équipe* (check). It has been held every year since 1903 except during the two world wars (check the gaps).

More than a race

The Tour is unusual among sporting events because it comes to the spectator. Millions line the roads for free, towns bid to host a stage, and the route is a tour of the French

landscape. Television coverage is as much about the châteaux, the villages and the mountains as it is about the cycling. That is why this course treats it as a part of French culture, with its own history, myths and language.

The Four Jerseys

Jersey (check each)	Awarded to
Yellow (*maillot jaune*)	The overall leader on time. It is yellow because the newspaper *L'Auto*, which founded the race, was printed on yellow paper; it was first worn in 1919 (check).
Green (*maillot vert*)	The leader of the points classification, which rewards finishing high on the flat stages and at sprints. Introduced in 1953 (check).
Polka-dot (*maillot à pois*)	The "King of the Mountains", for the best climber, in white with red dots. The jersey dates from 1975 (check), though the prize is older.
White (*maillot blanc*)	The best young rider (under 26), based on overall time (check the history of this award).

The Language of the Tour

Term (check each)	Meaning
Peloton	The main group of riders, from the French for a small body of soldiers. Riding in it saves energy, because the riders shelter each other from the wind.
Échappée	A breakaway: a small group that rides ahead of the peloton.
Domestique	A team helper who fetches drinks, shelters the leader and chases breakaways.
Contre-la-montre	A time trial: riders race alone against the clock.
Grand départ	The opening of the Tour, often in a city outside France.
Lanterne rouge	"Red lantern": the rider in last place overall, who has a following of his own.
Voiture-balai	"Broom wagon": the vehicle that picks up riders who abandon the race.
Flamme rouge	The red flag marking the last kilometre of a stage.

Term (check each)	Meaning
Grimpeur and *sprinteur*	A climber and a sprinter, the two best-known rider types.

Why a Culture Course?

- **It is a way into French history.** The race began in a political quarrel between rival newspapers, was stopped by two wars and helped to build a sense of the whole country (Chapters 2 and 3).
- **It is a way into French geography.** The routes through the Pyrenees, the Alps and the Massif Central make a map of the country's landscape and regions (Chapter 7).
- **It is a mirror of sport and money.** Its business model, scandals and television deals have often been ahead of the rest of sport (Chapters 6 and 8).
- **It has produced myths.** The French essayist Roland Barthes wrote about it in 1957 as a modern epic (Chapter 9, check).

Scope of the Course

Part (check)	Chapters	Topics
Beginnings	2, 3	The newspapers and the first Tour; the heroic age
The champions	4, 5	Coppi and Bartali, Anquetil, Merckx, Hinault, LeMond, Indurain
Trust	6	Doping and the crisis of the 1990s and 2000s
The event	7, 8	The route, the landscape, the caravan, television and money
Culture and method	9, 10	Women's racing, the Tour in art and writing, and testing the legend

The course is about the race as a culture and a story. It is not a training guide or a betting guide, it keeps results and records to those needed for the story (all flagged "check"), and it deals with doping and deaths factually and respectfully.

Myths to Test

Common claim	The question a careful reader asks (check each)
The Tour is the hardest sporting event in the world.	Hardest by what measure, and compared with what? (Chapters 3, 7 and 10)
The strongest rider always wins.	What do tactics, teams and luck contribute? (Chapters 4, 5 and 7)
The French always win their own race.	When did a Frenchman last win, and what changed? (Chapters 5 and 8)
The Tour is all about doping.	What is documented, and what has changed? (Chapter 6)
The Tour has always been an honest, simple race.	What do the early years show? (Chapters 2 and 3)
Cycling is a men's sport.	What is the history of women's racing? (Chapter 9)

Sources to Use

- **Newspaper archives.** The French national library's Gallica site has digitised runs of the sports press, including *L'Auto*, the paper that founded the race (check what is online).
- **The organisers.** The race's own website carries route maps and a record of past winners (check), though its history is told from the organisers' point of view.
- **Museums.** The French national sports museum, now in Nice, and local museums in towns on the route (check).
- **Books and essays.** Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), and general histories and travel accounts in English, such as Geoffrey Nicholson's *Le Tour* and Tim Moore's *French Revolutions* (check which are in print).
- **Television.** Live coverage in Britain has been shown on ITV4 and Eurosport (check current broadcasters), with archive footage from the French national audiovisual archive.

A British comparison

For British viewers the Tour became a national fixture only in recent decades: the Grand Départ in London in 2007, British winners from 2012 and the Yorkshire start in 2014 built an audience that had hardly existed before (check). The nearest British equivalent in spirit is perhaps an annual national ritual such as the Grand National or Wimbledon, except that the Tour is held in the open, over three weeks, in a different place every day. Britain's own

stage races, the old Milk Race and today's Tour of Britain, are modest by comparison (check).

Check the details

Race statistics, rules and the structure of the Tour change from year to year. The figures here (stages, distance, teams, jersey dates) are from memory and should be checked against the organisers' site and a reliable reference. Stories about the race are often retold in a polished form, so check the dates and names of any anecdote before you rely on it.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the four jerseys to a friend who has never watched the Tour, saying what each rewards and what kind of rider tends to win it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe an imaginary stage in two paragraphs using at least six terms from the vocabulary table.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Pick two claims from the "Myths to Test" table and say what evidence you would look for and where you would find it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Race:** stage race, about 21 stages, 22 teams of 8, organised by ASO since 1903
- **Jerseys:** yellow (overall), green (points), polka-dot (mountains), white (young rider)
- **Words:** peloton, échappée, domestique, contre-la-montre, lanterne rouge, voiture-balai
- **Method:** describe the story, check the figures, test the claims

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Origins: Desgrange, L'Auto and 1903

The Tour de France was not founded by a sporting body or a government. It was invented by a newspaper that was losing readers, in a quarrel that began over a political scandal. This chapter follows the story from the rival cycling papers of the 1890s to the first race in July 1903 and the crisis of 1904 that almost ended it. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Two Newspapers and the Dreyfus Affair

Le Vélo

Founded in Paris in 1892, *Le Vélo* became the leading daily cycling newspaper, edited by Pierre Giffard, who had organised some of the first long road races (check). Cycling was a craze in the 1890s: the "safety bicycle" with equal-sized wheels and pneumatic tyres had made the machine cheap, safe and fast.

The split

The Dreyfus affair divided France in the late 1890s, over the army officer Alfred Dreyfus, who had been wrongly convicted of treason. Giffard supported Dreyfus. Several of the paper's advertisers, including the car-maker Comte de Dion and the tyre makers Michelin, took the other side and withdrew their money (check). They helped to found a rival paper in 1900.

L'Auto

The new paper, first called *L'Auto-Vélo* and printed on yellow paper, was edited by Henri Desgrange, himself a former track cyclist who had set the first official hour record in 1893 (check). After *Le Vélo* went to court over the name, it was shortened to *L'Auto* in 1903 (check).

Business, not sport

The motive was circulation. Desgrange's paper was struggling against an established rival, and the owners needed something to bring in readers. The long-distance race, reported in daily instalments, was an old way of selling papers (races such as Paris to Brest and back and Bordeaux to Paris had been run in the 1890s, check). The yellow paper that distinguished *L'Auto* from its rivals is the reason for the yellow jersey (Chapter 1).

The Idea

- **Géo Lefèvre.** A young journalist on the paper, Géo Lefèvre, is credited with suggesting a race that would cover the whole country in stages over several days, in the autumn of 1902 (check the details of the story, which is often retold with a lunch at a Paris café).
- **"Tour de France."** The name draws on an older idea: the *tour de France* of the journeyman craftsmen who travelled the country to learn their trade, and the popular schoolbook *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* (1877), in which two orphans cross the country (check). A tour of the whole country was already a familiar image.
- **The pitch.** Desgrange was reluctant at first, then announced the race in January 1903, with a cash prize and a daily report in his paper (check).

The First Tour, July 1903

Feature (check each)	1903	Today
Stages	Six stages, with rest days between them	About 21 stages in 23 days
Distance	About 2,400 km, in stages of 400 km or more	About 3,300 km, with stages seldom over 250 km
Route	Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes, Paris; flat, with no high mountains	Changes each year; always includes the Alps and Pyrenees
Riders	Around 60 starters, many riding as individuals, some paying their own way; about 21 finished	Professional teams of eight
Winner	Maurice Garin, a chimney sweep turned professional, born in Italy and naturalised French	Decided by overall time over three weeks

Feature (check each)	1903	Today
Conditions	Unpaved roads, riding through the night, no support cars, fans handing out food	Race radios, team cars, a mechanical and medical service

The first race took place from 1 to 19 July 1903 (check). L'Auto reported it in daily instalments and its circulation rose sharply, reportedly from around 25,000 copies to about 65,000 during the race (check), and later far higher. The race had done what it was invented to do.

Crisis in 1904

The cheating

In the second Tour, riders were accused of taking the train or riding in cars, and of other tricks, and supporters of rival riders attacked competitors, scattered nails on the road and blocked the way with obstacles (check). The race ended in disorder.

The disqualifications

After an inquiry the governing body disqualified a number of riders, including the first four finishers, and the title went to Henri Cornet, aged 19 or 20, still the youngest winner on record (check). Desgrange wrote that the Tour was finished, killed by its own success (check).

The survival

The race continued in 1905 with changed rules, a points system for the order of finishers and stages that included the first real climbs (check). *Le Vélo*, meanwhile, closed in 1904 (check). The Tour had won the newspaper war.

A British comparison

The bicycle itself has Scottish connections: Kirkpatrick Macmillan of Dumfriesshire is credited by some with building the first pedal-driven bicycle in the 1830s, though the claim is disputed, and the pneumatic tyre was developed in 1888 by John Boyd Dunlop, a Scottish-born vet working in Belfast (check). Both helped create the machine that the Tour needed. As for the idea of a newspaper stunt to sell copies, British papers of the time did

the same with air races and other contests, such as the *Daily Mail*'s aviation prizes of the 1900s and 1910s (check).

Check the details

The founding story has been told many times, with some details polished. The numbers for circulation, starters and finishers vary by source, and the 1904 events are known mainly through newspaper reports and later retellings. Check the dates, and where you can, compare the newspaper accounts with a modern history.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain how the Dreyfus affair led indirectly to the Tour de France, and why the race made business sense for a newspaper.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare the 1903 Tour with a modern one in three respects and explain what the differences say about how sport has changed.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Most of what we know about 1903 and 1904 comes from newspapers, some of them involved in the race. Say what problems this raises and how a historian would deal with them.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Papers:** *Le Vélo* (1892, Giffard) against *L'Auto* (1900, Desgrange), split by the Dreyfus affair
- **Idea:** Géo Lefèvre, a round-France race, announced January 1903
- **First Tour:** July 1903, six stages, winner Maurice Garin
- **1904:** cheating and violence, disqualifications, Cornet declared winner
- **Result:** circulation soared; *Le Vélo* closed in 1904

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · The Heroic Age to 1939

Between the first Tour and the Second World War the race changed from a flat test of endurance into a drama of mountains, mechanical disasters and national rivalry. This is the "heroic age" of the legend: riders on heavy single-gear bicycles crossing the Pyrenees and Alps on unpaved roads. This chapter follows the great climbs, the first yellow jersey, a famous exposé of the riders' working conditions, and the rules that created the modern Tour. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Into the Mountains

The decision

Desgrange added the first real climb, the Ballon d'Alsace in the Vosges, in 1905 (check). In 1910 he took the race into the Pyrenees, over the Tourmalet and the Aubisque, and in 1911 into the Alps, over the Galibier (check). The roads were rough tracks, and the passes were often snowbound. Some officials thought it too dangerous.

"Assassins!"

In 1910 the winner, Octave Lapize, is said to have shouted at officials on the Aubisque, "You are murderers!" (*Vous êtes des assassins!*) (check). The phrase has become part of the legend: the mountains are the place where the Tour shows its cruelty.

Why it mattered

The mountains turned the race from a contest of stamina into one of drama, since a leader could lose minutes in a single climb. They also took the Tour into regions that had never seen professional sport. The mountain stages remain the heart of the race (Chapter 7).

Christophe's Forge

1913: the broken fork

On the descent of the Tourmalet in 1913, the Frenchman Eugène Christophe, then leading, broke the fork of his bicycle. The rules said that a rider must make his own repairs, so he carried the machine on his shoulder for about 10 km (reports vary, check) to a village forge, where he mended it himself. He was given a time penalty when a boy was found to have worked the bellows for him (check). He lost the race but won an enduring place in the legend, and the story is retold as proof of the riders' toughness and the severity of the rules.

The Yellow Jersey

- **1919.** After the First World War the Tour resumed. In 1919 the leader began to wear a yellow jersey, so that spectators could recognise him; Christophe was the first to wear it (check). The colour matched the paper of *L'Auto* (Chapter 2).
- **Belgian winners.** From 1912 to 1922 Belgian riders such as Philippe Thys, Firmin Lambot and Léon Scieur won most Tours (check), a sign of how international the race had become.
- **Heroes and nicknames.** The press called the riders "giants of the road" (*géants de la route*) and wrote about their sufferings in epic terms.

The Convicts of the Road

Event (check each)	Note
1924 walkout	The Pélissier brothers, Henri and Francis, left the race after a dispute with officials about a rule on clothing (check). Henri Pélissier had won the Tour in 1923.
The interview	The journalist Albert Londres met them at a station café and reported their account in his newspaper under the title "The Convicts of the Road" (*Les Forçats de la route*). They described their daily ordeal, the painkillers and stimulants they took, and the conditions of the race (check). It remains a classic of sports journalism and a document of early drug use.

Event (check each)	Note
Bottecchia	The Italian Ottavio Bottecchia won the Tour in 1924 and 1925. He died in 1927 after being found injured by a roadside, in circumstances that have never been settled (check).

Rules, Teams and the Caravan

Change (check each)	Note
Long stages	The 1926 Tour was about 5,700 km, the longest of all, with stages of 400 km or more (check).
National teams	In 1930 Desgrange replaced the trade teams, funded by cycle makers, with national teams, which made the race a contest of France against Italy, Belgium and Spain and gave the crowds teams to support (check).
The publicity caravan	From 1930 the organisers also let firms promote their products in a procession of vehicles ahead of the race, as a way to pay for it (check). It has been a feature ever since (Chapter 8).
Supplied bicycles	For a time the organisers supplied identical bicycles to the riders (check).
Mountains prize	A prize for the best climber was first awarded in 1933 (check); the polka-dot jersey followed later (Chapter 1).
Gears	Desgrange long opposed the derailleur gear; it was allowed in 1937, which made climbing easier (check).
Radio and newsreel	Live radio reports began about 1929 and newsreels brought pictures to the cinema, building a national audience (check).

The Interwar Winners

France won often in the early 1930s, with André Leducq and Antonin Magne (check), and then Belgium and Italy took the lead, with Gino Bartali's win in 1938, an Italian victory that Mussolini's regime was glad to publicise (check). The paid holidays given to French workers by the Popular

Front government in 1936 are often linked to a rise in cycling and in roadside crowds (check). The last pre-war Tour was held in July 1939, and the race did not return until 1947 (Chapter 4). Henri Desgrange had handed over to his colleague Jacques Goddet in 1936, and died in 1940 (check).

A British comparison

British cycling went another way. Because the cycling authorities of the 1890s feared trouble with the police over bunch racing on the public road, racing in Britain moved to the individual time trial, held in the early morning on quiet roads, with riders in black clothing and no publicity, a tradition that lasted for decades (check). The first British team to enter the Tour was a small one in 1937, with riders such as Charles Holland (check). The gap between the two cultures is part of why the Tour seemed foreign to British riders for so long.

Check the details

Legends cluster around the heroic age: quotations, distances carried, the number of spectators and the punishments imposed have all been retold with variations. Check the dates and the numbers in a standard history, and treat any quotation from the period as reported speech.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Why did the introduction of the mountains change the nature of the Tour? Give three effects on the race and on its audience.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Read the story of Christophe's forge as a historian: what is the evidence, what do the retellings add, and what does the story show about the Tour's rules of the time?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain the introduction of national teams and the publicity caravan in 1930, and what each did for the race's finances and its audience.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Mountains:** Vosges 1905, Pyrenees 1910, Alps 1911; Lapize's "assassins"
- **Legend:** Christophe's forge, 1913
- **1919:** first yellow jersey
- **1924:** the Pélissier brothers and *Les Forçats de la route*
- **1930:** national teams and the publicity caravan
- **1937:** derailleur gears allowed; 1939 the last pre-war Tour

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · After the War: Coppi, Bartali and the Golden Age

When the Tour restarted in 1947 it became a symbol of reconstruction, and for the next twenty years it produced rivalries that are still retold: two Italians who divided their country, a Frenchman who won five times, and the "eternal second" who was loved more than the winner. The period also saw the arrival of live television and the first death on the race that the sport could not ignore. This chapter follows those rivalries and the changing economics of the sport. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Race Restarts

1947

After the Second World War the Tour resumed in 1947, under the direction of Jacques Goddet, with national teams again (check). France was still short of food and fuel, and the race was a sign that normal life was returning. The first post-war winner was the Frenchman Jean Robic, in 1947 (check).

Bartali, 1948

Gino Bartali, winner of 1938, won again in 1948, ten years after his first victory. Italian legend says that his success calmed the country after the shooting of the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti that July (check; the story is often repeated and hard to prove). Bartali is also recognised for helping to hide Jewish people in Italy during the war, for which he was honoured by Israel's Yad Vashem in 2013 (check).

Television

French television began to cover the Tour in the late 1940s and showed it live from 1952 (check). Millions could now watch it at home, and the race's audience moved from the roadside and the radio to the screen (Chapter 8).

Coppi and Bartali

Italy divided

Fausto Coppi and Gino Bartali were rivals for the national title and for the affections of Italy. Bartali was older, devout and conservative, and Coppi younger, elegant and modern; the country took sides (check; the picture of a Catholic and a communist rivalry is a simplification). Coppi won the Tour in 1949 and 1952, and the Giro d'Italia and Tour in the same year, a double that had never been done (check). In 1952 he won the first stage to finish at the top of Alpe d'Huez (check), the climb that became the Tour's most famous. His private life, an affair with a married woman, brought scandal in Catholic Italy (check), and he died in 1960 of malaria (check).

The Golden Age Winners

Rider (check each)	Note
Hugo Koblet, Ferdi Kübler	Swiss winners of 1951 and 1950. Koblet was a stylish "pedaller of charm", and Kübler a showman.
Louison Bobet	France's hero of the 1950s and the first man to win three Tours in a row, 1953 to 1955.
Charly Gaul	Luxembourg's "Angel of the Mountains", a small, reserved climber who won in 1958, especially in bad weather.
Federico Bahamontes	The "Eagle of Toledo", Spain's first winner in 1959, who attacked on the climbs and was said to wait for ice cream at the top.
Jacques Anquetil	The first five-time winner (1957 and 1961 to 1964), a cool time-trial specialist who was nicknamed "Maître Jacques". He was open about his use of drugs, and is reported to have said that races could not be ridden on water alone (check).
Felice Gimondi, Lucien Aimar, Roger Pingeon	Winners of 1965, 1966 and 1967, as the mid-60s produced less dominant champions.

Anquetil and Poulidor

- **Two Frances.** Anquetil was a Norman from a Parisian background, elegant and calculating; Raymond Poulidor, the son of a poor farmer from the Limousin, was loved as a man of the people. The country divided into supporters of each (check).
- **The eternal second.** Poulidor never won the Tour or wore the yellow jersey, but finished second three times and third five times (check). The French name him *l'éternel second* and treated him as an affectionate national figure, in a way that suggests that the French sometimes love the underdog more than the winner.
- **1964.** On the Puy de Dôme, Anquetil and Poulidor rode side by side up the climb in one of the most famous duels in the history of the race; Anquetil kept the jersey by a small margin (check).
- **Trade teams return.** From 1962 the race was again contested by teams financed by sponsors, not national squads, as manufacturers pushed for it (check). It remains the model today.

Tom Simpson, 1967

The rider

Tom Simpson, born in County Durham in 1937, was the leading British professional of his day. He was the first British rider to wear the yellow jersey (1962), a world champion in 1965 and BBC Sports Personality of the Year that year (check).

The death

On 13 July 1967, on the climb of Mont Ventoux in extreme heat, Simpson collapsed and died at the roadside, aged 29. An inquiry found that he had taken amphetamines, together with alcohol, in addition to the heat and exhaustion (check). His death shocked the sport.

The aftermath

A memorial stands near the spot, and cyclists still leave tributes there. The sport introduced doping controls the following year (check), but the problem of drugs in the sport continued (Chapter 6).

A British comparison

British participation began slowly. Brian Robinson of Yorkshire is usually named as the first Briton to finish the Tour (1955) and the first to win a stage (1958) (check), followed by Simpson and, in the 1960s and 1970s, Barry Hoban, who won several stages (check). They rode for continental teams and were mostly unknown to the British public until Simpson's death. For a Scottish reader, the Tour's next big link comes with Robert Millar in the 1980s (Chapter 5).

Check the details

This era is full of legends, and several of them are about private lives and politics (Bartali's role in 1948, the Coppi scandal, quotations attributed to Anquetil). Check each against a biography or a reputable history. The picture of Italy divided into two camps is a journalists' simplification, and the details of Simpson's final day are covered in an inquest and in several books.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Why did the rivalry of Coppi and Bartali capture a national imagination? Give the case for treating it as a political story, and a case for treating it as a sporting one.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Why was Poulidor loved more than many winners? Suggest three reasons and say what evidence you would use.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe the effects of Tom Simpson's death on the sport and its attitude to drugs, using the evidence of what changed and what did not.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1947:** the Tour restarts; **1948:** Bartali wins again
- **Coppi:** winner 1949 and 1952; first Alpe d'Huez finish (1952); died 1960
- **Others:** Bobet (three in a row), Gaul, Bahamontes, Anquetil (five wins)
- **Rivalry:** Anquetil and Poulidor, the 1964 duel on the Puy de Dôme
- **1962:** trade teams return; **1967:** Tom Simpson dies on Mont Ventoux

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Merckx, Hinault, LeMond and Indurain

From the end of the 1960s to the middle of the 1990s the Tour was dominated by four great champions, each of whom won it five times or came close to it. This was the era of colour television, of the first non-European winners, of the race's last French victory, and of one of the closest finishes in its history. This chapter follows the four champions and their rivals, and takes a Scottish detour with Robert Millar's remarkable Tour of 1984. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Eddy Merckx, the Cannibal

Dominance

The Belgian Eddy Merckx won the Tour five times (1969 to 1972 and 1974), a total shared with Anquetil, and later with Hinault and Indurain (check). In 1969, his first Tour, he won the yellow, green and polka-dot jerseys together, an achievement not matched since (check). The press called him "the Cannibal" because he left nothing for others.

Beyond the Tour

Merckx also won the Giro d'Italia five times, the world road title three times and a long list of one-day classics, and set a new world hour record in 1972 (check). Many consider him the most complete rider in history; the measure depends on what you count.

The end of his reign

In 1975 a spectator punched Merckx in the stomach on the climb of the Puy de Dôme, and he lost his chance of a sixth title; the French rider Bernard Thévenet won (check). Merckx never won the Tour again.

Bernard Hinault, the Badger

- **Five wins.** The Breton Bernard Hinault won in 1978, 1979, 1981, 1982 and 1985 (check). Called *le Blaireau* ("the Badger") for his combative character, he was a strong time-trialler and a fierce climber.
- **The last Frenchman.** His win in 1985 is the most recent victory by a French rider in the Tour to this day (check). Since then France has produced strong challengers, but not a winner, a long drought that features in French sports debate.
- **The 1980 knee.** In 1980 he withdrew with tendinitis in his knee while leading (check); in 1985 he won despite a bad crash.
- **The 1982 strike.** riders including Hinault took part in a strike over race conditions (check the details).

Greg LeMond and the Americans

Event (check each)	Note
1986	LeMond, Hinault's team-mate, won the Tour, the first American to do so, after a tense contest with Hinault, who had promised to support him but kept attacking. They crossed the line together on Alpe d'Huez with arms raised (check). The story is still argued over by fans.
The accident	In April 1987 LeMond was shot in a hunting accident and missed two seasons (check).
1989	LeMond won the closest finish in Tour history: starting the final time trial in Paris 50 seconds behind Laurent Fignon, he overtook him and won by 8 seconds (check). He used aerodynamic handlebars that Fignon lacked, and the result is still discussed as a milestone in technology.
1990	LeMond won a third Tour (check).
Why it mattered	An American winning with an American-sponsored team opened the race to the English-speaking world and television markets beyond Europe (check).

Miguel Indurain

Five in a row

The Spaniard Miguel Indurain won five consecutive Tours from 1991 to 1995, the first rider to do so (check). A very large man for a climber, with a strong aerobic engine and a quiet, modest manner, he built his wins on time trials and controlled the mountain stages without dramatic attacks. Critics called him dull; his supporters thought him as perfect as a rider can be. After 1995 he was beaten, and retired in 1996.

Other Winners

- **Joop Zoetemelk** of the Netherlands won in 1980 after many years as a runner-up (check).
- **Laurent Fignon**, French, won in 1983 and 1984 and lost to LeMond in 1989 (check). He was noted for his ponytail and glasses.
- **Stephen Roche** of Ireland won in 1987, in the same year that he won the Giro and the world championship (check).
- **Pedro Delgado** of Spain won in 1988 (check).

Robert Millar, 1984

A Scot in the mountains

Robert Millar, born in Glasgow in 1958 and raised in Scotland, won the King of the Mountains title in the 1984 Tour and finished fourth overall, which was the best British result for a quarter of a century (check). He won several mountain stages in the 1980s, and a second place in the 1987 Vuelta a España (check).

The man and the name

Millar was known as a reserved and private person, and in 2017 publicly came out as a transgender woman, now known as Philippa York (check). York has written about cycling since, for newspapers and magazines.

Why it matters here

Millar showed that a British rider from a small cycling country could win in the Pyrenees and the Alps against the best of Europe, years before the British success of the 2010s (Chapter 8).

A British comparison

The Millar story has a Scottish context: he left Scotland to race in France as a teenager, as British amateurs did because there was no professional scene at home. Britain's own stars of the period came from track cycling and time trialling and rarely reached the Tour. The change begins in the late 1990s with the lottery-funded programme of British Cycling, and with the Olympic success that fed riders into road teams (Chapter 8, check).

Check the details

Records and margins in this period are quoted widely and sometimes wrongly. Check wins, margins and dates against the official record. A word of caution about the champions of the late 1980s and 1990s: several of them have been discussed in the context of the sport's drugs history (Chapter 6), and this chapter does not make claims about individuals beyond the record.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

How would you measure whether Merckx was the greatest cyclist of all time? List three measures and the difficulty of each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

In 1986 a team leader promised to help a team-mate and then attacked. Explain how team loyalty works in the Tour and why it produces such stories.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Why has France not had a Tour winner since 1985? Suggest three possible reasons and the evidence you would need to test each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Merckx:** five wins (1969 to 1972, 1974); three jerseys in 1969
- **Hinault:** five wins; 1985 the last French victory
- **LeMond:** 1986 (first American), 1989 by eight seconds, 1990
- **Indurain:** five in a row, 1991 to 1995
- **Millar:** King of the Mountains and fourth overall, 1984

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Doping and the Crisis of Trust

No account of the Tour is honest without its drugs history. Performance-enhancing substances were used in the race from its early years, became more powerful and more organised in the late 20th century, and led to the scandals that damaged its reputation around 1998 and again in the 2000s. This chapter reports the documented story: the early years, the Festina affair, the Armstrong case, the reforms and the continuing argument about trust. It deals with institutions and documented findings, and does not make claims about individuals beyond the public record. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Before 1998

The early years

In 1924 the Pélissier brothers told the journalist Albert Londres about the pills and lotions they took to ease the pain of the race (Chapter 3). In the following decades riders used stimulants such as amphetamines and, later, steroids, often openly, and the rules were weak (check). In 1967 Tom Simpson died on Mont Ventoux with amphetamines in his system (Chapter 4).

First rules and tests

France passed its first anti-doping law in 1965, and tests began in the Tour in the later 1960s (check). Riders sometimes resisted, with strikes and protests against tests, and the sanctions were mild. Cases such as the disqualification of Michel Pollentier in 1978 for trying to cheat a urine test became part of the sport's lore (check).

The EPO era

From the early 1990s the hormone erythropoietin (EPO), which raises the blood's oxygen-carrying capacity, was widely used, and there was no test for it until about 2000 (check). The cycling authorities introduced a limit on red blood cell concentration in 1997 as a health measure, an indirect control (check). Speeds in the

mountains rose, which later investigations connected to the practice.

The Festina Affair, 1998

What happened (check all the details)

A few days before the start, a team masseur (*soigneur*) of the Festina team was stopped by customs officers at the French-Belgian border with a car full of doping products, among them EPO (check). Police inquiries followed. During the race the Festina team was expelled, police raided hotels and questioned riders, other teams were investigated, and the riders staged protests and sit-down strikes in a revolt against the way they were being treated. Many teams left the race and only a fraction of the starters finished. The winner was Marco Pantani (check). The affair led to criminal trials in France, in which some Festina staff and riders admitted using banned products (check).

- **The significance.** It showed that drug use was organised and systematic, not the choice of a few individuals, and that the sport's institutions had known and tolerated it.
- **The reaction.** Sponsors, broadcasters and the public lost faith. The French government passed new laws on doping and sport (check).
- **The 1999 "Tour of Renewal".** The organisers promised a clean race the next year. The winner, Lance Armstrong, would later be stripped of that title and six more (below).

The Armstrong Case

Step (check each)	Note
1999 to 2005	Armstrong, an American who had recovered from cancer, won seven Tours in a row.
Allegations	Journalists, former team-mates and others alleged drug use over years, and Armstrong denied it and sued some who said so.
2012	The United States Anti-Doping Agency published a lengthy report with testimony from many riders, concluding that he had led a sophisticated doping programme;

Step (check each)	Note
	the cycling authority accepted the findings and removed his results from 1998 onward, including all seven Tour wins (check).
2013	Armstrong admitted in a television interview that he had used banned drugs (check).
The record	The Tour's official list of winners shows no winner for those seven years (check).

Other Cases

- **2006.** On the eve of the Tour, Spanish police inquiries (Operación Puerto) led to the exclusion of several favourites. The apparent winner, Floyd Landis, tested positive after a stage, and was stripped of his title (check).
- **2007.** A leader was withdrawn by his team after a doping finding, and a stage winner was expelled; the German public broadcasters stopped live coverage of the Tour for several years (check).
- **2010.** The 2010 winner, Alberto Contador, tested positive for a banned substance, and was stripped of the title after a long legal process (check).
- **The pattern.** Each case produced a change in the rules or the testing, but also showed that the system had holes.

Reforms

Reform (check each)	Note
WADA	The World Anti-Doping Agency was founded in 1999 after the Festina affair, with a common code for sport from 2003.
EPO test	An urine test for EPO was used from about 2000.
Biological passport	Introduced around 2008: a record of each rider's blood values over time, so abnormal changes can be detected without a test for a specific drug.
Independent testing	Testing was moved away from the cycling authority to an independent foundation (check).

Reform (check each)	Note
Team and sponsor rules	Teams and sponsors adopted anti-doping codes, and some teams hired their own medical monitoring (check).

Is It Clean Now?

That question cannot be settled by a single fact. Supporters of the present system point to the passport, to out-of-competition tests and to a changed culture among young riders, and note that the winning speeds of recent years are not out of line with improvements in training and equipment (check). Sceptics point to the many years in which the system failed, the limits of testing and the claims of a few former riders that doping is not over (check). In the UK a parliamentary committee reported in 2018 on the use of permitted medical exemptions by the Team Sky squad, finding that the team had "crossed an ethical line" in its use of medicines, though no breach of rules was established by the anti-doping authority (check; the team and the riders involved rejected the criticism). A careful reader keeps the questions apart: what the rules were, what was done and what can be proved.

A British comparison

Doping has marked British sport too: athletics, rugby league and football have all had cases and inquiries, and the question of how far "legal but unethical" medical practices go has been argued about in the Team Sky affair and in the 2016 leak of athletes' medical exemptions (check). The Tom Simpson memorial on Ventoux, visited by many British cyclists, is a reminder that this is a question of human cost, not only of rules.

Check the details

This is a chapter where accuracy matters most. Statements about individuals should rest on public findings (court judgments, anti-doping tribunal decisions, official reports, the individuals' own admissions) and not on rumour. The details above are from general knowledge; verify each against the original documents, such as the USADA reasoned decision of 2012, the French court reports of 1998 and later, and the UK parliamentary report of 2018.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why drug use persisted in the Tour for decades, using the incentives facing riders, teams, sponsors and the authorities.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Rank these kinds of evidence by reliability for a claim that a named rider used banned drugs in a given year: a positive test, a confession, newspaper allegations, a rival's testimony, unusual performance. Say what each can and cannot prove.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Evaluate the claim "the Tour is clean now": say what evidence would support it, what would count against it, and why a final answer is hard.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Early:** Londres's *Forçats de la route* (1924); Simpson's death (1967)
- **1998:** the Festina affair, expulsions, strikes, trials
- **Armstrong:** seven wins removed after the 2012 USADA report; 2013 admission
- **Reforms:** WADA (1999), the EPO test (about 2000), the biological passport (about 2008)
- **Method:** separate rules, actions and what can be proved

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · The Route and the Landscape

No two Tours are the same, because the route changes every year. The route decides which riders can win, which regions are shown to the world, and where the crowds gather. This chapter explains how the route is designed and sold, the kinds of stage that make up a Tour, the climbs that have become landmarks, and the traditions of the start and finish. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Designing a Tour

Who decides

The organisers (ASO, Chapter 1) design the route, led by the race director, and announce it in the autumn before the race (check). They balance the sport (a route that keeps the contest open until the last week) with the television audience, the regions and the budget.

Who pays

Towns and regions bid to host a stage start or finish, and pay a fee to the organisers, often a sum in the tens or hundreds of thousands of euros (check). In return they receive a day of national television and a great deal of publicity. A hosting bid is a political and commercial decision for a local council.

The rules of thumb

The route usually runs round France in a loop, clockwise or anticlockwise, with the Alps and Pyrenees included, though each year the mix of flat, hilly and mountain stages differs (check). It always finishes in Paris. A route with many time trials favours one kind of rider and one with many summit finishes another.

The Kinds of Stage

Stage type (check each)	What happens	Who it suits
Flat stage	Usually ends in a bunch sprint, with a breakaway often caught in the last kilometres.	Sprinters
Hilly stage	Short climbs and rolling roads, where breakaways often succeed.	Attackers and puncheurs
Mountain stage	Several long climbs, often with a descent finish or a summit finish.	Climbers and overall contenders
Individual time trial	Riders race alone against the clock, one after another.	Time-trial specialists
Team time trial	Teams race together against the clock; the time of a certain rider in the team counts.	Strong, balanced teams
Prologue	A short opening time trial, used in some years to decide the first yellow jersey (check).	Time-trial specialists

Climbs are classified by difficulty, from fourth category to first category and then the hardest of all, *hors catégorie* ("beyond category"), with points for the King of the Mountains awarded in proportion (check). There are also intermediate sprints, bonus seconds and a daily prize for the most combative rider.

The Great Climbs

Mountains as monuments

Some climbs are famous for their place in the race's history more than their height. The Col du Tourmalet (Pyrenees) was first used in 1910 (Chapter 3). The Col du Galibier (Alps) is among the highest in the race (check). Mont Ventoux in Provence is a bare, white limestone summit where Tom Simpson died (Chapter 4). Alpe d'Huez has 21 numbered hairpin bends, and a corner where Dutch fans traditionally gather. The Puy de Dôme in the Massif Central, an extinct volcano, was the scene of the 1964 duel (Chapter 4). Each one has a memorial, a museum, a fan culture and a set of stories.

- **Fans on the mountain.** Spectators camp for days, paint riders' names on the road, run alongside the riders in costume and cheer through the whole afternoon. A well-known

figure is the "Devil", a German fan in a red outfit who has appeared along the route for decades (check).

- **The cobbles.** Some Tours include stages over cobbled roads in northern France, borrowed from the spring classics such as Paris–Roubaix and a hazard for the overall contenders (check).
- **The landscape on television.** Helicopter cameras show vineyards, châteaux, sunflower fields and medieval villages, so each stage is also an advertisement for French tourism.

Start and Finish

Tradition (check each)	Note
The finish in Paris	The Tour has ended in Paris since 1903. Since 1975 the last stage has finished on the Champs-Élysées, with a circuit round the Arc de Triomphe. The last stage is by custom a ceremonial ride until the final laps, when the sprinters compete.
The Grand Départ abroad	The Tour has started outside France many times, beginning with Amsterdam in 1954 (check), and the places have included Brussels, San Sebastián, London in 2007, Rotterdam, Liège, Leeds in 2014, Utrecht, Düsseldorf, Copenhagen, Bilbao and Florence (check). Foreign cities pay for the honour.
The neutralised start	Each stage begins with a parade through the host town before the official start, so the crowds can see the riders (check).

What the Route Does for Towns

Hosting the Tour is expensive and brief. Supporters say that it brings visitors, hotel bookings, television pictures and civic pride, and that a start or finish town can see lasting gains in tourism (check). Sceptics note that studies of the economic benefit are mixed, that the costs of road works and security fall on the town, and that the effect of one day is hard to measure (check). Evidence to look for includes the council's own accounts, hotel occupancy and independent studies, which do not always agree with the claims of the organisers.

> **A British comparison**

The Yorkshire Grand Départ of 2014 is the British case study: the first two stages ran through Yorkshire, followed by a stage from Cambridge to London, and the organisers and local councils reported large crowds and a boost to tourism (check). Yorkshire later hosted the road world championships, and the county's roads and climbs, such as the Cote de Buttertubs, became cycling attractions (check). In Scotland, cyclists compare the Bealach na Bà in Wester Ross, with its steep, twisting road, to the Alpine passes (check), and the Tour of Britain has raced in Scotland in several years (check).

Check the details

Routes, host cities and fees change each year, and the figures for crowds and economic benefit come from organisers and councils, who have an interest in large numbers. Check the heights and gradients of climbs in a guidebook and the route in the organisers' own pages for the year in question.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Design a 21-stage Tour: list the mix of stage types you would use, where it would start and finish, and which kind of rider your route favours.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain how climbs are categorised and how they affect the King of the Mountains competition and the overall result.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

A town council is deciding whether to bid to host a stage finish. List the likely costs and benefits and the evidence the council should ask for before deciding.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Route:** designed by ASO each year; towns pay to host; always ends in Paris
- **Stages:** flat, hilly, mountain, individual and team time trial, prologue
- **Climbs:** categories 4 to 1 and *hors catégorie*
- **Landmarks:** Tourmalet, Galibier, Ventoux, Alpe d'Huez, Puy de Dôme
- **Traditions:** the Champs-Élysées finish (from 1975), the Grand Départ abroad

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Caravan, Television and the Business

The Tour is free to watch from the roadside, which raises a practical question: who pays for it? The answer is a mixture of advertising, television rights, host towns and sponsors, held together by a private company. This chapter looks at the publicity caravan that parades ahead of the riders, at how television changed the race, at the economics of teams, and at the British success that transformed the Tour's audience in the 2010s. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Publicity Caravan

What it is

About two hours before the riders, a procession of decorated vehicles passes along the route, handing out free samples, hats, key rings and sweets to the crowds. It has existed since 1930 (Chapter 3). Today it includes well over a hundred vehicles from a few dozen firms, and millions of items are thrown out each year (check the figures).

Why it works

For the firms it is a chance to put their brands in front of a captive roadside audience and a television audience at once. For the organisers it is a source of revenue. For spectators it is an entertainment of its own, with floats in the shape of giant cheeses, sausages or tyres, and fans who collect the giveaways (check).

The criticism

Critics point to the waste and plastic litter left on the roads, and the organisers have promised to reduce it, with limits on throwaways and cleaner vehicles (check). The caravan is a place where the Tour's commercial and ecological arguments meet.

Who Pays for What

Source (check each)	Note
Television rights	The largest source of income for the organisers. Broadcasters in France and around 190 other countries pay for the right to show the race (check). The French public broadcaster has long been the main partner.
Host towns	Fees paid by towns and regions for the right to host a start or finish (Chapter 7).
Race partners and the caravan	Firms sponsor the race, the jerseys and the other classifications, and buy places in the caravan.
Teams' sponsors	The riders' teams are paid for separately, by their own sponsors. A top team's yearly budget can be tens of millions of euros (check), some of it on the Tour itself, and the sponsor expects exposure in return.
Prize money	A total prize fund of about two million euros, with a winner's prize of several hundred thousand (check). Riders usually share it with their teams.

The organiser, the private company ASO (Chapter 1), makes its money from the race and other events it owns. The riders' teams, by contrast, depend on sponsors with no direct share in the race's revenue, which has been a source of friction between teams, organisers and the international federation (check). A dispute over the structure of professional cycling in the mid-2000s, sometimes called the "cycling war", led to years of argument over which races belonged to which series (check).

Television

From radio to helicopters

Radio gave listeners the first live commentary in the 1920s and 1930s (Chapter 3). Television came to the Tour from the late 1940s, with live pictures from 1952 (Chapter 4). By the 1980s the whole of the day's stage was being covered live, with motorbike cameras and helicopters. This changed how the race is run: stages are timed to fit a broadcast, attacks are made where the cameras can see them, and the scenery is part of the product. A rider's fame now depends on being seen, which is one reason why teams care so much about where their sponsors' logos appear on screen (check).

- **The commentary.** For English-speaking viewers the voices of Phil Liggett and the late Paul Sherwen defined the race for decades (check). Channel 4 popularised the Tour in Britain from the 1980s to the 1990s, and ITV, Eurosport and later other channels took over (check the current broadcasters).
- **The audience.** The organisers say that the race reaches billions of viewers cumulatively and that millions line the roads (check). These are marketing claims, counted in ways that favour large numbers, and an independent historian would ask how they were measured.
- **New media.** Streaming, social media and a Netflix documentary series that followed the teams (from 2023, check) have widened the audience to younger viewers.

The British Turn

Step (check each)	Note
2007	The Grand Départ in London, with huge crowds, started the change in British interest in the Tour.
Team Sky (2010)	A British-based team funded by a media company, with the declared aim of producing a British Tour winner within five years. It later became Ineos Grenadiers, after a change of sponsor (check).
2012	Bradley Wiggins won, the first British winner. The same year saw the London Olympics, which boosted cycling's profile.
Froome, Thomas	Chris Froome won four Tours between 2013 and 2017, and Geraint Thomas, from Wales, won in 2018.
Mark Cavendish	A sprinter from the Isle of Man who won a record number of Tour stages, equalling and then passing the long-standing mark of Eddy Merckx (check).
2014	The Yorkshire Grand Départ (Chapter 7).

This success turned British cycling from a minority sport into a mass interest, with record sales of road bikes and clothing and a "Wiggins effect" on participation (check). It also brought scrutiny: the 2018 parliamentary report discussed in Chapter 6 concerned the team that was at the centre of it.

> **A British comparison**
>
> The Tour's finances differ from those of a league sport: the organiser owns the race and sells it, while the teams belong to other companies. A British parallel is the Grand National

or Wimbledon, run by a private body that sells the broadcasting rights and lets the public in for free or at a modest price (check). A Scottish equivalent might be the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which also relies on the public presence for its atmosphere, its sponsors and its tourism effect (check).

Check the details

Business figures (budgets, television fees, prize money, audience counts) come mainly from the organisers, the teams and the media, and are rarely audited in public. Treat them as claims and check them against financial reports, press coverage from independent sources and the current year's information.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the economics of the publicity caravan from the point of view of the organiser, a sponsor and a spectator, and say what each gains and risks.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe three ways in which live television has changed how the Tour is raced and what evidence you would use to show it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

The organisers claim billions of viewers. Explain how you would test that claim and what difficulties you would meet.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Caravan:** since 1930; free samples; income for the organiser; litter criticism
- **Income:** television rights, host towns, partners; teams funded by their own sponsors
- **Television:** radio, live pictures from 1952, motorbike and helicopter cameras
- **British turn:** London 2007, Team Sky 2010, Wiggins 2012, Froome, Thomas, Cavendish

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Women, Myth and Culture

So far the Tour in this course has been a men's race, as it was for most of its history. This chapter asks what happened to women's racing, and then turns to the other side of the Tour's life: the writers, filmmakers and musicians who made it a subject of art, and the amateurs who ride its mountains for themselves. It ends with the Tour as a national story. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Women and the Tour

The 1980s Tours

A women's stage race called the Tour de France Féminin was held from 1984 to 1989, running at the same time as the men's race and sometimes on the same roads (check). The winners included the American Marianne Martin in 1984, the Italian Maria Canins and the Frenchwoman Jeannie Longo (check). Its organisers and its relation to the men's Tour changed from year to year, and it ended for lack of money and backing.

The gap

After 1989 there were other women's stage races under different names in France, but none with the men's Tour's name or its television, until 2014. Why the gap lasted so long is argued: the lack of sponsors and broadcasters, the attitudes of the organisers and the cycling authorities, and the fewer professional contracts for women riders (check).

Revival

From 2014 to 2021 the men's organisers ran a one-day women's race, La Course, held on the same day as a men's stage, after a campaign by riders for a bigger event (check). In 2022 a full stage race returned under the name Tour de France Femmes: eight days in July, shown on television, and won by the Dutch rider Annemiek van Vleuten (check). The next two editions were won by Demi Vollering and Kasia

Niewiadoma, the latter by a very small margin (check).

Still unequal

Women's cycling has changed greatly since 2014, with a professional top level, a world series from 2016 and more television (check). The gaps remain: prize money, rider salaries and the amount of coverage are still well below the men's, and the women's race is shorter than the men's three weeks (check). The question of whether the two races should be the same length, and what "equal" should mean in sport, is argued by riders, teams and organisers.

Barthes and the Epic

- **The essay.** In 1957 the critic Roland Barthes included a short essay on the Tour in his collection *Mythologies*, "The Tour de France as Epic" (check). He treats the race as a modern epic, with a hero, villains, a cast of types and a journey round the nation.
- **The ideas.** He argues that the race turns a real event into a story that the readers of the newspapers shared: the whole of France as a stage, the riders as characters with names and roles, and suffering as a moral lesson (check). He also notes the role of the press, which gave the race its epic language.
- **The use.** The essay is useful as a document of how the Tour was perceived in the 1950s and as an example of how to read a popular event for its myths. Its claims are those of a critic, not of a historian (Chapter 10).
- **Antoine Blondin.** The writer Antoine Blondin covered the Tour for *L'Équipe* for many years from the 1950s, and his literary reports are cited as a high point of sports writing in French (check).

Films, Songs and Books

Work (check each)	Note
Vive le Tour (1962)	A short documentary by the director Louis Malle, filmed during the 1962 race, which shows the riders, the caravan and the crowds.

Work (check each)	Note
Kraftwerk, *Tour de France* (1983)	A single by the German electronic group, who were keen cyclists. It uses sampled sounds of breathing, chains and gears. A full album, *Tour de France Soundtracks*, followed in 2003, the centenary year. A German musical link to the French race.
Les Triplettes de Belleville (2003)	An animated feature by Sylvain Chomet, in which a grandmother seeks her grandson, a Tour rider, kidnapped during the race. It is a comic homage to the Tour's mythology.
Paul Fournel	A writer and keen cyclist, author of essays on cycling such as *Besoin de vélo* (2001) and a short book on Anquetil (check).
Posters and prints	The Tour's posters, from the early 20th century to the present, show how its image changed from a gruelling ordeal to a family festival (check).

For a historian these works are evidence of the Tour's image, not of what happened in a given year, so they need to be read with the right questions (Chapter 10).

Riding It Yourself

- **L'Étape du Tour.** Since 1993 a cycling event for amateurs has allowed thousands of riders to ride a mountain stage of the Tour on closed roads, shortly before the professionals (check). Tickets sell out quickly, and the result is a mass pilgrimage.
- **Everyday cyclists.** Cyclists of all abilities ride the famous passes in summer, take a picture at the summit sign and buy a souvenir jersey. Several of the great climbs have monuments, and some towns have museums of the race.
- **Fans.** The roadside culture of picnics, flags and painted roads is itself a tradition, with families who return to the same spot each year (check).

The Tour as National Story

The Tour has often been described as a mirror of France: its regions, its countryside, its rural life, its holidays in July and, in the 20th century, its relationship to Paris and to the rest of Europe. Historians point out that this mirror is selective, since the route for most of the 20th century showed a rural and provincial France and left out the industrial suburbs and immigrant communities (check), and that the race was also a stage for French rivalries with Italy, Belgium

and, later, the Anglophone world. The same story has been told in a new way as the British, American and Danish winners have arrived. Whether the Tour is more French or more global now is one of the questions of the final chapter.

A British comparison

Women's cycling in Britain has an honourable history: British women cyclists were prominent on the track and in time trials from the 1950s, and Beryl Burton, from Yorkshire, dominated British and world championships over two decades (check). Lizzie Deignan from Yorkshire won the first women's Paris–Roubaix in 2021 (check). In cultural terms, the nearest British equivalent to Barthes on the Tour is perhaps Tim Moore's comic travel book *French Revolutions* (2001), in which a British writer rides the route (check), and the nearest to Kraftwerk's single is the large body of British cycling documentaries and the BBC's televised coverage.

Check the details

The history of women's racing is poorly documented compared with the men's, and its names, dates and organisers vary between sources. Check each against the cycling authority's records and the organisers' pages. The summary of Barthes's essay is a paraphrase from memory: read the essay itself.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Draw up a timeline of women's racing connected with the Tour, and suggest three reasons for the long gap with the evidence you would need to test each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Apply Barthes's idea of the Tour as epic to a recent Tour: identify the hero, the villain, the journey and the moral, and say where the idea fits badly.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose one film, song or book about the Tour and say what it shows about the Tour's image and what it cannot show about the race itself.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Women:** Tour de France Féminin (1984 to 1989); La Course (2014 to 2021); Tour de France Femmes (from 2022)
- **Barthes:** *Mythologies* (1957), the Tour as epic
- **Culture:** Malle's *Vive le Tour*, Kraftwerk, *Les Triplettes de Belleville*, Blondin, Fournel
- **Amateurs:** L'Étape du Tour (from 1993)

The Tour de France

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Testing the Legend

The Tour is one of the most heavily mythologised events in sport, and the myths are part of its appeal. This last chapter pulls the course together: a timeline, a table that tests the claims from Chapter 1 against what the course found, a six-question method for testing any claim about the race, and some advice on reading race history as a source. Dates are from the earlier chapters and flagged "check" where they were.

A Timeline of the Tour

Period	Strand (see chapter)
1900 to 1904	The newspaper war, the first Tour (1903) and the crisis of 1904 (Chapter 2, check)
1905 to 1939	The mountains, the yellow jersey (1919), national teams and the caravan (1930) (Chapter 3)
1947 to 1967	Coppi and Bartali, Anquetil and Poulidor, trade teams (1962), Simpson's death (Chapter 4)
1969 to 1995	Merckx, Hinault, LeMond, Indurain; Millar in 1984 (Chapter 5)
1998 to 2012	Festina, Armstrong, the reforms (Chapter 6)
Throughout	The route and the landscape; the caravan, television and money; the British turn (Chapters 7 and 8)
1984 onward	Women's racing and the Tour in culture (Chapter 9)

Myths and Evidence

Claim from Chapter 1	What the course found
The Tour is the hardest sporting event in the world.	Unproven as stated: it is among the most demanding endurance events, but "hardest" depends on the measure, and the claim is partly a marketing line.

Claim from Chapter 1	What the course found
The strongest rider always wins.	False: teams, tactics, luck, route design and, in some years, rule-breaking have decided the result.
The French always win their own race.	False now: France dominated the early decades, but its last winner was in 1985 (check).
The Tour is all about doping.	False as stated: doping is a documented and serious part of the history, but not the whole of it, and the controls are very different from those of the 1990s.
The Tour has always been an honest, simple race.	False: it began as a newspaper stunt, had cheating and violence in 1904, and has always been a commercial enterprise.
Cycling is a men's sport.	False as a history, but true of the Tour's long history: women's racing has been intermittent and unequal (Chapter 9).

Testing a Claim: Six Questions

1. Who says it?

The organisers, a rider, a journalist, a sponsor, a historian or a fan? Each has an interest.

2. What exactly is claimed?

Pin down the words: "hardest", "cleanest", "greatest", "first". Define them before looking for evidence.

3. What would count as evidence?

Results, race records, documents, tribunal decisions, financial statements, contemporary reports. Decide before you look.

4. Compared with what?

Other races, other eras, other sports. A claim of superiority needs a comparison.

5. Which period?

The Tour of 1903, 1967, 1998 and 2023 differ so much that a claim about "the Tour" needs a date.

6. What would change my mind?

State in advance what finding would count against the claim.

Worked example: "The Tour is the hardest sporting event in the world"

1. It is said by organisers, broadcasters and fans, and it sells the race. **2.** "Hardest" might mean the longest, the most physically punishing, the most dangerous or the one with the highest rate of withdrawal. **3.** Evidence: duration and distance, energy expenditure from sports-science studies, injury and abandonment rates, and expert comparisons. **4.** The comparison might be other Grand Tours, ultra-marathons, adventure races or team sports over a season. **5.** The 1920s Tour was longer and rougher, the modern Tour faster and better supported. **6.** A study showing that other events demand more energy or cause more withdrawals would count against it. **Verdict:** defensible for "one of the most demanding endurance events in professional sport"; not proven as "the hardest", which is a superlative that the evidence cannot settle.

Race History as a Source

- **It records winners and times,** which are the hard facts, though even these have been changed after the fact (stripped titles).
- **It records stories,** which are valuable for the Tour's image but unreliable as facts: they are retold, polished and sometimes invented (Chapters 2 and 3).
- **It records money and power.** The route, the rules and the teams show who had influence at the time (Chapters 7 and 8).
- **It records what is left out.** Women, immigrants and non-European riders appear late, and the sources must be read for their silences (Chapter 9).
- **Method.** Use the official record for results, independent documents for disputes and scandals, and the cultural works for the image. Say which is which.

A British comparison

The same method works on British sporting legends: "the Home of Cricket", "the Open is the oldest golf major", "Scottish football crowds are the best in the world". Each can be broken down in the same way (who says it, what exactly, what evidence, compared with what, which period, what would change my mind). An Edinburgh reader might try the method on a local legend, such as claims about the oldest Hogmanay street party or the Fringe being the largest arts festival in the world (check).

Check the details

The timeline and tables summarise the earlier chapters, and their "check" items still apply. The verdicts are conclusions from the sources used in this course, not proof, and a different set of sources might shift the emphasis. Race statistics and records change each year.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one entry from the myths-and-evidence table (other than the worked example) and apply the six questions to it in a short paragraph for each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Take one famous Tour anecdote (Christophe's forge, Lapize's "assassins", or another) and test it as a source: what evidence supports it, who told it and when, and what would you want to see?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Apply the six questions to a legend about a British or Scottish event and say what you conclude.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Six questions:** who, what exactly, what evidence, compared with what, which period, what would change my mind
- **Verdict on the legend:** a real and remarkable race whose claims need careful wording
- **Sources:** official records for results, independent documents for disputes, cultural works for the image

Course complete

You have finished *The Tour de France*: the race in outline, its newspaper origins, the heroic age, the golden age, the great champions, the doping crisis, the route and the landscape, the caravan, television and business, women's racing and the Tour in culture, and a method for testing the legend. Related courses include *French Film & Television*, *French Literature*, *French Music*, *Jeux Sans Frontières* and *Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée*.